

# Selling the Public What it Doesn't Want

How \$25,000,000 in Medicines and Other Products are Disposed of Annually by Wagon Salesmen

By CARROLL EVERETT

IF A maker of pianos were to distribute his product broadcast to protesting citizens, and insist upon leaving a piano in every home he visited, without requiring a deposit or payment of any kind, the popular verdict would be that he had gone mad. And if he silenced the objections of those who declared they didn't want a piano by assuring them that "they might need one, sooner or later," and that they needn't pay for it if it didn't suit them, his affairs would soon be in the hands of a receiver.

And if a city druggist were urged to follow these tactics, by scattering his medicines in a carefree manner and without asking whether the people wanted his goods, he would probably reply—and reply truthfully—that the great bulk of the public is healthy, and that to normal, healthy people the chance to buy medicines is about as alluring as the chance to buy tombstones.

But in spite of these obvious observations, there is a business in this country which disposes of approximately \$25,000,000 worth of products—mostly medicines—each year, and does it by using just such methods. The goods are sold to people who, for the most part, declare they won't have any use for them, and don't want them.

This gigantic trade, founded on unique methods, imposes itself upon the rural population by a sort of forcible distribution. And strange to say, approximately 97 per cent of the products thus haphazardly placed are ultimately paid for willingly in cold cash by the very persons who protested vehemently against allowing them to enter the house in the first place. These goods, which are practically unknown to city dwellers and never advertised in newspapers or magazines, are not offered for sale through the usual channels by retail stores, but are disposed of through an army of 12,500 wagons.

Most retail dealers, in fact, probably would have to confess never having heard of these flourishing houses, but if one is curious as to their size and standing, a glance at the rating of the concerns in the big commercial credit agencies is convincing enough. Their rating is uncommonly high. The assets of a single company in a quiet Minnesota town is around \$8,000,000; while another in northern Illinois is rated at \$4,000,000. In addition, there are perhaps fifty smaller concerns engaged in the same business, which bring the total assets of the medicine wagon industry to approximately \$25,000,000.

One such firm boasts the largest single building in the world devoted solely to the manufacture of proprietary medicines, while another claims to own the finest administration building of its kind in America. Their annual purchases and importations amount to hundreds of trainloads, one firm handling 5,000 carloads of freight yearly.

DESPITE the assaults made on the "patent medicine" business, and the increased contacts of the rural population with urban life, these "wagon houses" continue to flourish, and not merely to hold their own, but actually to increase the volume of business from year to year. Many of the sturdiest opponents of patent medicines would be astonished to discover how the traffic in this form of commodity, which they have assumed to be waning at a rapid pace, is waxing in strength by intensive cultivation in the more secluded districts of the United States and Canada.

The secret of the success of these companies is that they have learned, and proved to their own financial satisfaction, that the American farmer, once he has allowed himself to be saddled with a tentative purchase, even though against his will, will consider the bargain a binding one, and meet the obligation to pay, when it is finally presented.

The promoters of this scheme of selling have discovered, also, that the farmer will gradually acquiesce in this sort of forced selling, and tolerate the method of leaving medicines in his home, whether he wants them or not. He is easily led, once he is made to feel that he will not be made the victim of imposition or sharp practices.

The wagon men are told at the outset by the companies which they represent that their prospective customers will say that they are not sick, have no use for medicine, and will not be interested in it. The wagon men, by a complete system of sales instruction, are educated to expect these initial rebuffs, and to meet them tactfully. In other words, they appear to agree with the customer, but at the same time, they manage to leave a few bottles and boxes behind. Many wagon men thus practically stack their wares on the shelf beside the clock, or on the kitchen table, and walk out, unruffled.

This trick is, to their way of thinking, the first step of a sale. If they succeed in leaving something behind, the chances are that on their next visit, some of

it will have been used. The shrewd wagon man knows that minor ills and injuries are likely to intervene—someone will have indigestion, or a touch of sore throat, or a sprained ankle, or a slight cold—and that, in this emergency, the mere fact that the medicine is on the premises will be a sufficient incentive to its use.

When these emergencies arise, someone in the family is certain to remember the bottles "which the medicine wagon man left the other day," and to suggest that it won't do any harm to "try the stuff."

The medicines usually have some slight effectiveness in relation to the ailments which they are supposed to cure, and they get credit for improvements which nature generally makes. Consequently, when the wagon man comes around again in the course of two or three months, he finds the farmer ready and willing to make payment for the stuff which he succeeded in leaving on his previous call.

The family may "hand back" some of the compounds which they haven't opened, or which they may not have liked, but in any event, the ice has been broken, and the wagon man shrewdly repeats the process. This time, there is less opposition to his cheerfully announced intention to leave a few more bottles of things which he thinks they might need sometime.

As he puts them on the shelf, he disarms criticism by the assurance that "if they get cracked or broken, it will be my loss—not yours." To this, he is apt to add the bland explanation that his wagon is pretty well crowded, anyway, "so you won't mind my leaving these few things here until I come around on my next trip, will you?"

He is not the least bit disturbed by the response that they don't intend to use what is being left, for he knows from previous experiences that the chances are that they will use them.

By successive visits, the wagon man ingratiates himself as a pleasant acquaintance. Country people do not meet salesmen so often as city people, and the visit of the wagon man is often a welcome break in the monotony of farm routine. Therefore, after his first or second visit, when he has demonstrated that he will actually take back medicines as he said he would, he can leave a wider range of his products.

One medicine company puts out more than a hundred separate medicine products "for man or beast," poultry medicines, flavoring extracts and spices, toilet articles, and so on. The fundamental purpose of the business is to sell the medicines, for the spices, extracts and toilet articles, while profitable, are so much less so that they are sometimes said to be used to "float" the main products. For example, the housewife who might chase the wagon man with a broomstick if he first offered her a bottle of horse liniment, may be lured to exercise her woman's prerogative of testing something needed in the culinary art. The wagon man will first offer her a bottle of lemon extract or a can of cinnamon, as a bait for his major purpose.

It is relatively easy to get spices and extracts into a house. Then comes the real business of the salesman, which is to leave medicines. New wagon men, who report large sales or "lodgments" of spices and extracts, are often admonished by their companies that they should devote their energies to leaving medicines. Customers are allowed to voluntarily buy and pay cash for the extracts. The big thing, which is always kept before the wagon man, is to get his case inside the house. One of the first principles of the business is to avoid opening up the stock of medicines outside the house or on the porch. Once inside the doorway, pantry shelves or kitchen tables offer convenient places

upon which to stack a selection of the medicines, while discoursing upon their uses. Meantime, he insinuates himself into the good graces of the housekeeper by presenting a package of chewing gum to the children, and by admiring the baby, in the way he is taught to do by the bulletin of suggestions which he has received from the medicine house.

The wagon man always carries a highly diversified line of medicines, in order to suit all preferences. If the customer objects to this or that liniment or salve, there is always something else "just as good" in the wagon. It behooves the salesman never to praise any one brand more than another, else he will be put in the position of "knocking" one of his own products. He is cautioned by his employer to stick close to the statement that "they are all equally good, only some prefer one kind, and some another." Then he leaves a "selection" which he thinks most likely to win favor. The recruiting and training of the wagon men is one of the curiosities of modern business. It is a field in which young men, with no sales experience and often of little schooling, are enabled to make large profits, if they have the requisite knack of making friends of their possible customers. A bottle of pain or blood medicine, which the wagon man sells for a dollar, costs him around 30 cents, giving him a far larger margin of profit than the average druggist enjoys.

In spite of the enormous increase in crude drug prices during the war, the increases in wholesale cost of these products was slight. The logical inference is that a very little crude drug makes a vast lot of medicine. It has been stated that some of these manufacturers compute the minimum net profit on a basis of a dollar a day per wagon—or \$300,000 a year profit from each 1,000 wagons on the road. Thus a company with 2,000 wagons should average \$600,000 profit annually. At a low estimate, there are probably 12,500 wagon men doing an aggregate business of \$25,000,000 yearly.

AN ODD feature of the business is that men in thinly settled localities made larger sales than in more populous areas. The explanation is that people in sparsely settled regions go to the stores seldom and are in the habit of obtaining supplies in larger quantities. A skilful wagon man may leave a half dozen bottles of cough medicine at a house, full of children, while only one or two bottles could be left advantageously in a similar household in frequent touch with the drug store.

Wagon men are warned not to ask customers: "Do you want anything today?" or in any way to open an avenue for refusal. The constant injunction is to do the customers' thinking for them, decide what they should have, and leave the goods.

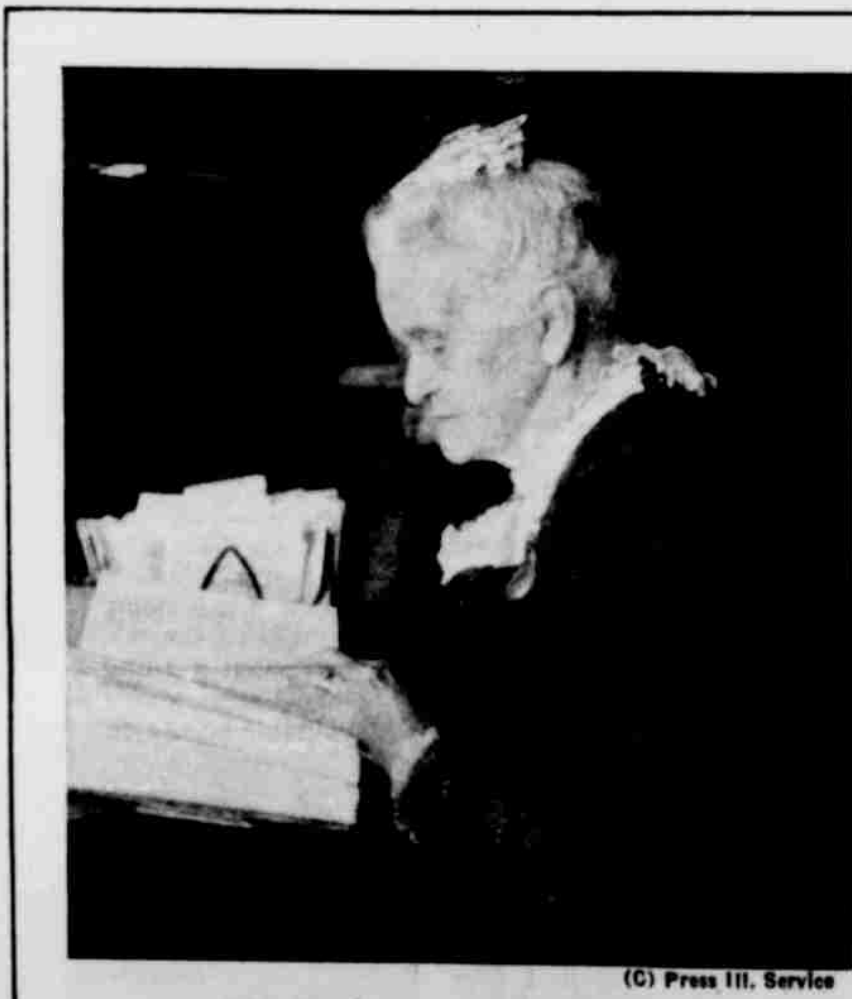
The word "should," as used in printed suggestions to the salesmen, has the force of command. So adroitly authoritative in tone are many of the suggestions that wagon men frequently are under the impression that they are "working for the company" instead of legally in business for themselves. Although the company is not legally the employer of the men, it frequently fosters that impression for the sake of the advantage it has in dictating to its agents.

The companies prefer credit sales, it having been found that the farmer will take less goods if he is paying cash for them. There is practically no question of getting paid for them ultimately, for experience has proved that no matter how large the bill may be, it is generally paid.

The wagon men follow the calendar. The annual cough medicine drive starts in August. It used to begin in June, but June is now favored for specializing in laxatives. In January, wagon men are urged to begin leaving blood medicines, for that "tired feeling most everybody gets in the spring." In the South, the respective "leaving campaigns" antedate those of the

North by a month or two, but the same relative schedule is maintained.

Not infrequently, the legislative situation makes it necessary for the wagon men, under the direction of their companies, to be politicians as well as salesmen. When a bill to license them heavily or to put them out of business comes up in a state legislature, the medicine companies supply their men with petitions to circulate among their customers. Almost any farmer will oblige by signing a petition, and the result is that the legislature gets the impression that there is strong opposition to the impending measure among their constituents. Thus the fruitful field of the wagon man is kept clear of legal impediments, and year after year, he makes his profitable rounds, leaving bottles and almanacs and advice. And year after year, the rural population pays fancy prices for patent medicines, the makers of which are able to laugh at the efforts of the reformers to oust them.



## Growing Old Gracefully

MRS. VIRGINIA TERHUNE

Better known as

MARION HARLAND

Born 1835—Age 84

SHE has written for years and is known to the housekeepers of America for her many cook books, articles on household management, etc. Even now she edits a large household column that is syndicated throughout the country.